

## **Questions & Answers about Being A Volunteer Ombudsman**

Q: What does the word “ombudsman” mean?

A: “Ombudsman” comes from the Swedish word “ombud” which means representative or agent.

Q: What is a volunteer ombudsman?

A: An individual who has been trained by the Northern Virginia Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program to promote the implementation of the Residents’ Bill of Rights in long-term care facilities (nursing homes and assisted living facilities). The volunteer monitors the quality of care provided; maintains contact with residents and counsels them regarding any complaints/concerns; and represents their interests to the facility staff. The volunteer is assigned to work at a specific facility and must be free from a direct conflict of interest in performing his or her duties.

Q: Is a volunteer ombudsman the same as a “friendly visitor”?

A: No. A volunteer ombudsman is a friendly advocate who visits the long-term care facility to monitor conditions and actively represent the needs of the residents there.

Q: What does the volunteer ombudsman do during the weekly visits?

A: The volunteer visits one-on-one or in small groups with the residents, by going room to room or chatting in common areas. The intent is to build trusting relationships so that individuals will feel comfortable to raise their concerns. The volunteer becomes familiar with non-communicative residents, too. While the ombudsman will not initiate contact with residents’ families or friends, he or she may work with them as they meet during facility visits.

Q: How does the ombudsman handle complaints?

A: The ombudsman encourages residents to voice their concerns to the staff themselves, and offers support in that process. As needed, the ombudsman will take a complaint in writing to his or her contact person on the facility’s administrative staff. Then the ombudsman follows up with both parties to monitor the correction of the problem. The volunteer also brings his or her observations of problems directly to the contact person. Volunteers refer persistent problems to the ombudsman program office.

Q: What types of complaints does the volunteer ombudsman handle?

A: A wide variety, such as poor food quality, shortage of staff, unsanitary conditions, inadequate activities programming, slow responses to call bells, roommate conflicts and violations of the Residents’ Bill of Rights.

- Q: What skills does the volunteer ombudsman use?
- A: Listening, observing, mediating, interviewing, motivating, and verbal and written communication skills.
- Q: What qualities does it take to be an effective volunteer ombudsman?
- A: Objectivity, diplomacy, persistence, patience, assertiveness and an interest in helping people in an advocacy capacity. We have also found that empathy, compassion, a tolerance for ambiguity and conflict, and a sense of humor go a long way.
- Q: **How much time is involved?**
- A: Beyond the initial 3-day training and facility site visit:
- 1) Weekly facility visits: A volunteer ombudsman is asked to make a commitment of *four (4) hours a week for one year*. The hours do not have to be consecutive. The volunteer can set his/her own schedule and it can vary from week to week, with the stipulation that *at least two hours each week must occur between the hours of 9:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. on a weekday*. Allowances are made for vacations and sickness.
  - 2) In-services: Volunteer ombudsmen are asked to attend periodic in-service training sessions. They are normally **2 hours long**, held on a weekday morning or afternoon, and there are usually **five meetings** per year.
  - 3) Activity reporting: Each month the ombudsman submits a two-page report form. Complaints handled during the month are written up separately on one-page forms. Time to complete the reports ranges from 15 to 45 minutes.
- Q: Is supervision provided?
- A: Yes. A full-time Volunteer Coordinator and the other ombudsman program staff have phone and email contact, and staff makes site visits with volunteers individually. Volunteers provide peer support at the in-service meetings. Additionally, Volunteer Ombudsman Mentors are available for advice and support.
- Q: **How can I become a volunteer ombudsman?**
- A: The application process involves completing the following:
- 1) An application;
  - 2) An in-person interview *prior to the training*;
  - 3) Attendance at three days of initial training;
  - 4) A site visit with a current volunteer ombudsman;
  - 5) A criminal history record check;
  - 6) and final approval by staff upon completion of items 1-5.

Q: What are the benefits of serving as a volunteer ombudsman?

A: A few of the rewards are bringing joy and comfort to sometimes forgotten, vulnerable individuals; ongoing professional training in the dynamic field of long term care; and helping to make a positive difference in peoples' lives. To quote our volunteers, "The elderly need advocates and we can't let them down. Each time I visit, I seem to learn something about life and aging." "A family member whose thanks are sincere or a resident whose face lights up when you come in, is very rewarding."

Q: How many paid and volunteer staff are in the Ombudsman Program?

A: The Northern Virginia Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program has 4.5 paid ombudsman positions responsible for serving the residents of one hundred and eleven (111) facilities that are licensed to operate, with a total of 10,799 beds. Therefore volunteers play a critical, central role in the program's mission! In recent years the program has been fortunate to have at least 55 active volunteers contributing to this effort.

Q: Where does the Ombudsman Program get its authority and funding?

A: The Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program was created by federal law in 1978. The federal Older Americans Act requires every state to have an ombudsman. Virginia's Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman is located in Richmond, and the work of ombudsmen in Virginia is authorized by state code. The Northern Virginia Ombudsman Program is a public service that began in 1985 and serves Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, Prince William, and the City of Alexandria. Funding comes from the state and federal levels, but primarily from the Area Agencies on Aging of these five jurisdictions.

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*If you have additional questions, the Volunteer Coordinator at the Northern Virginia Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program would welcome your call. Please phone **703-324-5435***

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The Northern Virginia Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program is committed to a policy of nondiscrimination in all programs, services and activities and will provide reasonable accommodations and alternate formats upon request. To request accommodations or alternate formats, call 703-324-3575 or TTY: 703-449-1186.

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